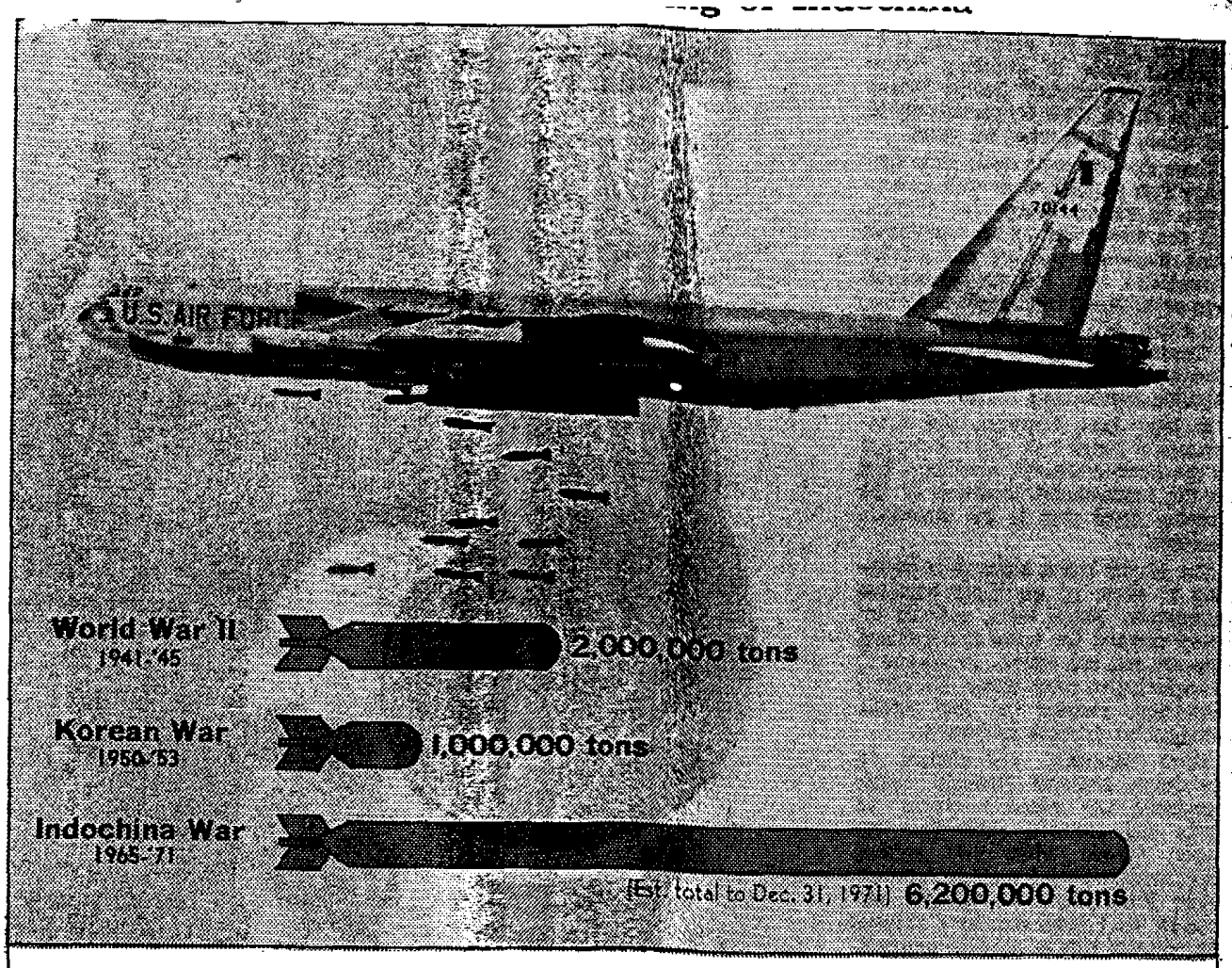

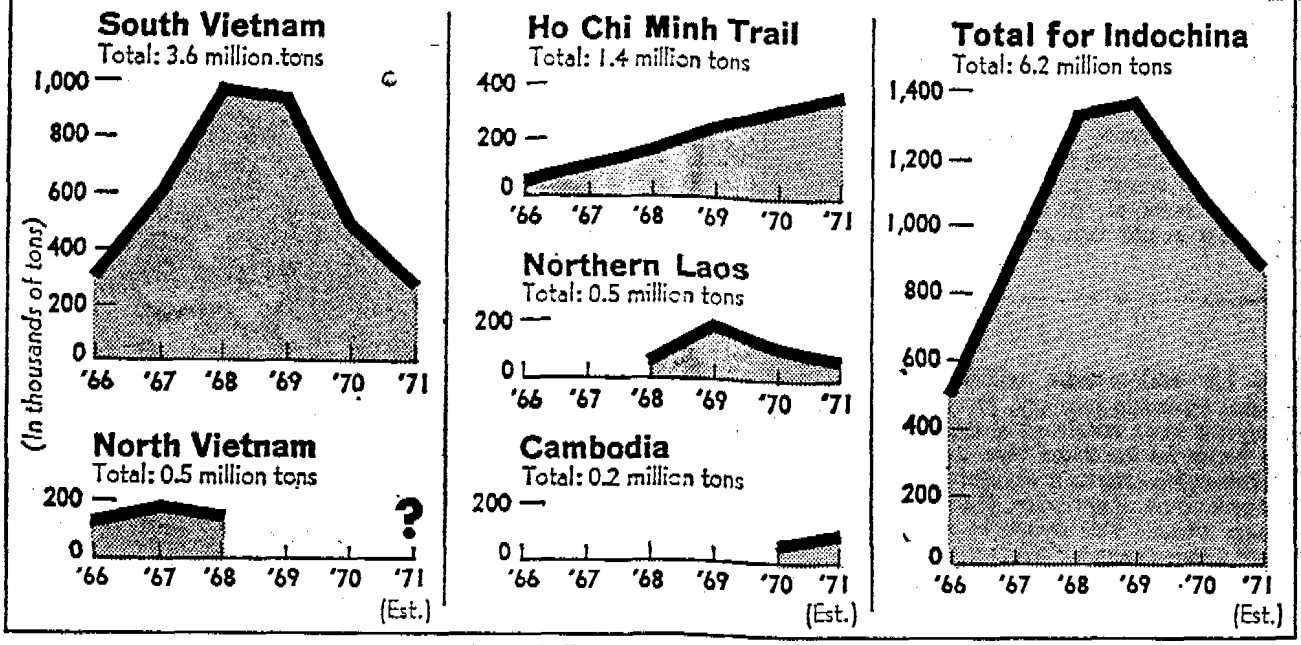

Charts indicate total tonnage of bombs dropped by United States planes on Indochina as compared with other wars and a breakdown of tonnage dropped on specific areas. In November, 1968, President Johnson announced cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam. However, intermittent raids, whose tonnage as indicated by the question mark on the North Vietnam chart is uncertain, have continued.

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WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

Charges and Air War Data Conflict

By ORR KELLY

One of the most serious claims made by opponents of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia is that American planes have taken over the job of devastation from ground troops and that the air war has been quietly — and cruelly — escalated.

This viewpoint was summed up in an article in the July issue of The Washington Monthly magazine by Fred Franfman, who was in Laos from March 1967 until February 1971, both as a worker with International Voluntary Services and, later, as a free-lance writer.

"While most people believe that bringing the troops home is synonymous with getting out of Vietnam," he wrote, "ground troops are becoming irrelevant to the war effort. The real war has taken off. The skies are being filled with American planes as the land is emptied of its foot soldiers.

"The Nixon administration has accomplished massive aerial escalation, perhaps more devastating than President Johnson's troop buildups of 1965, with minimum public notice of concern because the country still thinks it is fighting with the Green Machine — the ground army — of the 1970s. But the war of the 1970s is that of the Blue Machine — U.S. air power — several thousand feet above the grunts, climbing away from the American agony."

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This is in direct conflict with repeated statements by administration officials. On Jan. 20, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird said: "The number of sorties has been reduced and it will continue to be reduced . . ."

On Jan. 27, he said: "As to American attack sorties in Indochina during 1970, they were down almost 50 percent from peak 1968 levels . . ."

On April 16, President Nixon declared: "Our air strikes . . . have also been reduced; our attack air sorties since we came into office have been reduced by 45 percent. They will continue to go down."

The official figures support the administration position. Allied aerial munitions expenditures — including rockets and bullets, as well as bombs — reached a peak of 1.4 million tons in 1968, dropped slightly to 1.39 million tons in 1969, dropped again to 977,446 in 1970 and added up to 390,956 through the first five months of this year. If the air war continues at that rate for the rest of the year, the total will be slightly below that for 1970.

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Another way to measure aerial activity is by number of sorties — one attack by one airplane. The official statistics are not entirely satisfactory because they are limited to South Vietnam, rather than including all of Southeast Asia. They do show, however, that the number of sorties by fixed-wing airplanes dropped from 281,686 in 1968 to 257,209 in 1969, and to 131,464 in 1970.

In Laos — the area of particular interest to Branfman — the most recent information comes from two investigators for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose.

"U.S. air operations in Laos have declined in the course of the past year and are now below the level of the first nine months of 1969," they wrote in a report issued Aug. 3. The number of sorties dropped from an average of 400 a day in the first part of 1969 to 350 a day a year ago and to 340 in April of this year.

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Figures supplied to the committee indicated the number of B52 sorties also had declined from last year's level, the report said.

All of these figures are from official sources — Moose and Lowenstein obviously couldn't personally go out and count sorties. So there still is the possibility that wrong numbers are being issued to hide an escalation of the aerial war.

There is one further check on the tempo of the air war — the amount the Air Force has been allowed to spend for bombs, rockets and associated equipment, including targets and spare parts. The total for all these reached a peak in fiscal 1969 of $2 billion and has dropped to $1.6 billion in 1970, $821.3 million in 1971 and $776 million in the 1972 budget.

The amount budgeted for bombs dropped from $1.2 billion in 1969 to $1 billion in 1970, to $522.5 million in 1971 and to $480.4 million in the 1972 budget.

Perhaps there still is room for some sleight-of-hand. But all the available figures support the administration's contention that the air war — as well as the ground war — is winding down, rather than escalating.